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**STATEMENT IN OPPOSITION TO THOSE PORTIONS OF HB 6353 and HB 6354
CONCERNING THE OFFICE OF GOVERNMENTAL ACCOUNTABILITY**

I regret that I cannot attend the Appropriations Committee hearing on March 22nd concerning the above-referenced bills. Ironically at a time when open and accountable government in Connecticut is fighting for its practical survival because of this proposed legislation, I will be in Tunisia helping that country establish a viable Freedom of Information regime, after the first “Arab Spring” revolution in the pursuit of democracy.

For over 30 years, I was Executive Director of the Freedom of Information Commission (FOIC). I also served as the Executive Director of the Office of State Ethics when it was first created in 2005. In essence, my job was to help ensure that government operated openly, ethically, and without corruption or undue political influences. But neither I, nor my staff, could have performed our “watchdog” role effectively if we had been subject – directly or indirectly – to employment decisions emanating from the Governor’s Office or Administration.

During my tenure, at least two Governors tried to diminish the integrity and independence of the three principal watchdog agencies – the FOIC, the then Ethics Commission, and the Elections Enforcement Commission – by trying to inject political influence over the staffs of these agencies, and by reducing their operating budgets so significantly that they could not perform their functions effectively.

It took courageous action by the General Assembly – and this committee in particular – to save these watchdog agencies by keeping their staffs independent of gubernatorial appointment and dismissal, and by ensuring that the commissions’ budget requests were submitted to the Legislature without Administration interference. The bills now in question would undo these good governance and anti-corruption reforms without adequate reason.

Like all government agencies, the three watchdog agencies have to commit to budget and spending reductions that reflect the state’s fiscal condition. And they have always done so. But now, as in the past, the Administration wants the power to make even further disproportionate cuts in the name of austerity. Austerity is one thing. Making the watchdog agencies impotent is quite another matter.

Many individuals and organizations – as well as editorials and commentaries – have superbly articulated why these draconian measures in HB 6353 and HB 6354 are so ill-advised. Consequently, I will not attempt to repeat their persuasive arguments. Suffice it to say that the proponents of these bills simply have not shown how their proposals will save any substantial amount of money whatsoever, beyond the excessive staff reductions they advocate. Indeed, in a moment of candor, the Secretary of OPM admitted publicly that the real purpose of these proposals is to place the watchdog agencies under the Administration’s thumb.

Instead of providing facts in support of their position, the bills’ proponents try to walk away from this failure by asking the non-responsive question: why should the watchdogs be treated differently than other state agencies?

The answer, of course, is that the watchdogs are indeed different. While they are part of the Executive Branch, but they are not – and should not be – part of any Governor’s Administration. Indeed, the watchdog agencies have been – and must be – independent of every Administration. If not, Connecticut is inevitably doomed to have future instances of corruption and mismanagement, in which the allegory of the fox guarding of the henhouse becomes our tragic reality again.